

OVERVOLTAGE PROTECTION CIRCUITS

Cross-Reference to Related Application

The application claims priority from U.S. provisional application Serial No. _____, filed June 15, 2001 (Attorney Docket No. 5646-54PR), the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference.

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to integrated circuit devices and, more particularly, to integrated circuits that provide overvoltage protection.

Background of the Invention

Signal buffers are frequently coupled to input or input/output pads on an integrated circuit substrate so that external signals having voltage swings that are incompatible with the voltage levels used by devices on the integrated substrate can be level shifted and/or compressed to compatible levels. Hereinafter, input and input/output pads will be referred to as I/O pads. As illustrated by FIG. 1, a conventional CMOS input stage **100** may be used as a buffer for external signals received at an I/O pad **101**. The CMOS input stage **100** may comprise a CMOS inverter **102** having an input connected to the I/O pad **101**. As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the CMOS inverter **102** comprises a PMOS pull-up transistor **103** and an NMOS pull-down

transistor **104**. The output **105** of the CMOS inverter **102** is electrically connected to the drain of the NMOS pull-down transistor **104** and to the drain of the PMOS pull-up transistor **103**, as illustrated. Because the PMOS pull-up transistor **103** and NMOS pull-down transistor **104** are connected in a totem pole arrangement between a positive power supply line and a ground reference potential, the voltage swing at the output **105** of the CMOS inverter **102** ranges from a minimum value of 0 Volts to a maximum value equal to the value of the positive power supply line V_{DD}.

Unfortunately, if an external signal received by the I/O pad **101** has an excessive positive voltage swing, the gate-to-drain voltage V_{GD} across the PMOS pull-up transistor **103** and the gate-to-source voltage V_{GS} and the gate-to-drain voltage V_{GD} across the NMOS pull-down transistor **104** may exceed the ratings of these transistors and cause device breakdown. Moreover, even if the maximum voltage supplied by the external signal to the CMOS inverter **102** is not sufficient to cause breakdown, it may be high enough to cause degradation of the transfer characteristics of the CMOS inverter **102** if exposure to the high external signal is prolonged.

Attempts have been made to protect input buffers from external signals having excessive voltages. One such attempt is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,319,259 to Merrill, entitled "Low Voltage Input and Output Circuits With Overvoltage Protection". As illustrated by FIG. 2, which is a reproduction of FIG. 9 from the '259 patent, an input stage **210** includes an input pad **200**, a zener diode **201**, an NMOS pass transistor **202**, a supply terminal **203**, a PMOS feedback transistor **204** and a CMOS inverter **205**. The CMOS inverter **205** comprises an NMOS pull-down transistor **208** connected in a totem pole arrangement with a PMOS pull-up transistor **207**. As illustrated, the PMOS feedback transistor **204** is electrically connected between an input **209** of the CMOS inverter **205** and

the positive supply terminal **203**. A gate of the PMOS feedback transistor **204** is electrically connected to an output **206** of the CMOS inverter **205**.

As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the zener diode **201** provides overvoltage protection for external signals having voltages in excess of about six (6) Volts. However, the NMOS pass transistor **202** provides overvoltage protection for external signals having voltages in a range between about six (6) Volts and the magnitude of the power supply voltage Vdd applied to the supply terminal **203**. For example, if an external signal having a voltage of 5 Volts is applied to the input pad **200** and the operating supply voltage is 2.5 Volts, the NMOS pass transistor **202** will initially reduce the 5 Volt signal level to an input node **209** at the input **209** that is equal to $V_{dd} - V_{TH-pass}$, where $V_{TH-pass}$ is the threshold voltage of the NMOS pass transistor **202**, perhaps 0.5 Volts. The voltage V_{209} at the input of the CMOS inverter **205** is sufficient to cause the output **206** of the CMOS inverter **205** to be pulled down to a logic 0 level. As illustrated, the logic 0 signal at the output **206** is fed back to the PMOS feedback transistor **204**, which then turns on to pull input node **209** up to the full supply voltage Vdd.

The PMOS feedback transistor **204** should be designed to have relatively weak pull-up characteristics so that an external signal transitioning from a logic 1 level to a logic 0 level will be able to overcome the pull-up logic force provided by the PMOS feedback transistor **204**. The PMOS feedback transistor **204** may be made relatively weak by making its channel relatively long or relatively narrow. Unfortunately, when an external signal transitions from a logic 1 level to a logic 0 level, the NMOS pass transistor **202** and the PMOS feedback transistor **204** initially operate as a pair of resistors connected in series between the input pad **200** and the supply terminal **203**. This series resistive path to Vdd slows the pull-down transition. More significantly, the series resistive path prevents the

input from meeting a typical input specification of nominally zero current, which presents a marketing problem for a product using this circuit.

Thus, notwithstanding these attempts to provide signal buffers that are capable of compressing external signal levels to internal voltages that are compatible with on-chip circuitry, there continues to be a need for signal buffers that occupy low area, have low power consumption requirements and limit all gate-to-source, gate-to-drain and drain-to-source voltages to safe voltages for the transistors contained therein.

Summary of the Invention

Overvoltage protection circuits according to embodiments of the present invention protect devices connected thereto by clamping input signals having excessive positive voltages in an efficient manner that does not damage either the overvoltage protection circuit itself or the other circuits connected thereto. One preferred overvoltage protection circuit includes a first NMOS pass transistor connected between an input signal line (IN) and an output signal line (OUT) to which an input of a load or logic device (e.g., inverter, multi-input logic gate) is connected. A gate of the first pass transistor is preferably connected to a signal line upon which a variable positive voltage level is maintained.

When an input signal (V_{in}) having a logic 0 level (low voltage) is provided to the input signal line IN, the first pass transistor operates as a normally-on transistor that passes the input signal V_{in} directly to the output signal line OUT. However, as the input signal V_{in} transitions from a logic 0 level to a voltage level above a supply voltage V_{dd} during a pull-up interval, the first pass transistor transitions from a highly conductive on-state to an off-state. In particular, the first pass transistor transitions to an off-state when a positive voltage on the output signal line OUT equals $V_{gate} - V_{th}$, where V_{gate} is the gate voltage of the first pass transistor and V_{th} is a threshold voltage of the first pass transistor. At this point, the first pass transistor blocks further increases in

the magnitude of the input signal V_{in} from being passed to the output signal line OUT. By action of the first pass transistor, the output signal line OUT is thereby clamped at a maximum level of $V_{gate}-V_{th}$, with further increases in V_{in} appearing across the drain and source terminals of the first pass transistor.

To prevent clamping of the output signal line OUT at a positive voltage below V_{dd} , it is advantageous to provide a gate voltage of the first pass transistor above V_{dd} , because the source voltage can follow the drain voltage only to the gate voltage less the threshold voltage of the first pass transistor. To achieve this goal, the gate of the first pass transistor is connected to a circuit that clamps the gate of the first pass transistor within a range of voltages. This range of gate voltages extends from a minimum clamped level to a maximum clamped level. In particular, a width of the first pass transistor is set at a relatively high level so that significant capacitive coupling (i.e., gate-to-channel capacitance) is provided between the signal lines IN and OUT and the gate of the first pass transistor. Thus, as the magnitude of the input signal V_{in} increases, the magnitude of the voltage at the gate of the first pass transistor increases in a self-bootstrapping manner, within the range permitted by the clamping circuit.

The clamping circuit preferably clamps the voltage at the gate of the first pass transistor at a maximum level that enables the output signal line OUT to reach a maximum level of about V_{dd} . To achieve this preferred maximum logic 1 voltage on the output signal line OUT, the clamping circuit preferably clamps the gate of the first pass transistor at a maximum voltage of about $V_{dd}+\alpha$, where α is preferably equal to V_{th} , and V_{th} equals a threshold voltage of the first pass transistor. As will be discussed in detail below, this first transistor will pass input voltages that are below or equal to V_{dd} to the output signal line OUT, but will not pass voltages above V_{dd} to the output signal line OUT.

According to a preferred aspect of this embodiment, the clamping circuit comprises first and second diodes electrically connected in antiparallel between a second power supply line and a gate of the first pass transistor. These first and second diodes operate to clamp the voltage appearing at the gate of the first pass transistor to within a desired range of voltages. These first and second diodes may comprise first and second NMOS transistors, respectively. According to a preferred aspect of this embodiment, a source of the first NMOS transistor, which operates as a cathode of the first diode, is electrically connected to a drain and gate of the second NMOS transistor and to the gate of the first pass transistor. The drain and gate of the second NMOS transistor operate as an anode of the second diode. A source of the second NMOS transistor is electrically connected to a drain and gate of the first NMOS transistor and to the second power supply line. According to an additional preferred aspect of this embodiment, a width of the first pass transistor is relatively large relative to the widths of the first and second NMOS transistors operating as diodes to thereby provide a high degree of capacitive coupling between the input and output signal lines and the gate of the first pass transistor. This high degree of capacitive coupling causes the voltage on the gate of the first pass transistor to immediately rise above the minimum clamped level as the input signal commences a transition from a logic 0 level to a logic 1 level.

According to a second embodiment of the present invention, an overvoltage protection circuit is provided that comprises first and second pass transistors electrically connected in parallel between an input signal line (IN) and an output signal line (OUT). A first power supply line is electrically coupled to a gate of the second pass transistor so that the gate of the second pass transistor is held at a fixed high voltage (e.g., Vdd). This second pass transistor improves the pull-down speed of the overvoltage protection circuit by turning on before the first pass transistor

when the input signal line IN is switching from a high positive voltage to a logic 0 level during a pull-down interval. A voltage clamping circuit is also provided. This voltage clamping circuit is similar to the clamping circuit described above with respect to the first embodiment, however, the first and second diodes are electrically connected in antiparallel between a second power supply line and a gate of the first pass transistor. The first and second power supply lines may be electrically connected together so that the magnitude of the supply voltages is the same.

The clamping circuit clamps a voltage at the gate of the first pass transistor at a minimum voltage of about $V_{dd2} - V_{TN1}$ in response to application of a logic 0 input signal V_{in} , where V_{TN1} is a threshold voltage of the first NMOS transistor. The gate of the first pass transistor is also clamped at a maximum voltage of $V_{dd2} + V_{TN2}$ in response to a positive transition of an input signal V_{in} by an amount equal to about $V_{TN1} + V_{TN2}$ (the exact amount depends on the ratio of the channel capacitance of the first pass transistor relative to the combined capacitance of the first and second diodes within the clamping circuit).

According to a third embodiment of the present invention, a signal buffer comprises a first pass transistor electrically connected between an input signal line and an output signal line. A preferred clamping circuit is provided to dynamically clamp a voltage at a gate of the first pass transistor. In particular, the clamping circuit dynamically clamps a voltage at the gate of the first pass transistor to within a first range so that a full logic 1 voltage (e.g., V_{dd1} but no more) can be established on the output signal line and magnitudes of all gate-to-source, gate-to-drain and drain-to-source voltages across any transistor will not exceed a level in excess of V_{dd} , even when V_{in} is raised to a level as high as $2V_{dd}$.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIG. 1 is an electrical schematic of a conventional input buffer.

FIG. 2 is an electrical schematic of a conventional input buffer having overvoltage protection circuitry therein.

5 FIG. 3A is an electrical schematic of an overvoltage protection circuit according to a first embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 3B is an electrical schematic of an overvoltage protection circuit according to a second embodiment of the present invention.

10 FIG. 4 is a timing diagram that illustrates operation of the signal buffer of FIG. 3B.

Description of Preferred Embodiments

15 The present invention now will be described more fully with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which preferred embodiments of the invention are shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as being limited to the embodiments set forth herein; rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will fully convey the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art. Like reference numerals refer to like elements throughout and signal lines and signals thereon may be referred to by the same reference characters. Moreover, the voltages and signal levels described herein assume a ground reference level of zero (0) Volts, however, as will be understood by those skilled in the art, non-zero ground reference levels may be used and the described voltage and signal levels may be adjusted accordingly.

25 Referring now to FIGS. 3A-3B and FIG. 4, overvoltage protection circuits according to embodiments of the present invention will be described. In particular, FIG. 3A is an electrical schematic of an overvoltage protection circuit **300** according to a first embodiment of the present invention. As illustrated, the overvoltage protection circuit **300** comprises a first pass transistor T3 and a voltage clamping circuit **310**.

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The first pass transistor T3 is electrically coupled to an input signal line (IN) and an output signal line (OUT). In particular, a first current carrying terminal of the first pass transistor T3 is electrically connected to the input signal line IN and a second current carrying terminal is electrically
5 connected to the output signal line OUT. When the input signal line IN is at a lower voltage than the output signal line OUT, the first current carrying terminal of the first pass transistor T3 will operate as a source and the second current carrying terminal will operate as a drain. The reverse is true when the input signal line IN is at a higher voltage than the output signal line OUT. However, for convenience, the first current carrying terminal of the first pass transistor T3, which has been designated by an
10 arrow in FIG. 3A, will be treated as a source herein.

In FIG. 3B, an overvoltage protection circuit **300'** according to a second embodiment of the present invention is illustrated. This second embodiment is similar to the first embodiment, however, a second pass transistor T4 is provided in parallel with the first pass transistor T3. A gate of the second pass transistor T4 is responsive to a positive voltage and is preferably electrically coupled to a supply line Vdd1. The first current carrying terminal of the second pass transistor T4 is also designated by an
15 arrow and will be referred to herein as a source.

The first pass transistor T3 in FIG. 3A and the first and second pass transistors T3 and T4 in FIG. 3B are illustrated as NMOS enhancement mode transistors having positive threshold voltages. In particular, the first pass transistor T3 comprises an NMOS transistor having a channel width
20 sufficient to have a relatively large gate-to-channel capacitance and also sufficient to quickly drive a capacitive load (not shown) connected to the output signal line OUT. The second pass transistor T4 is optional and comprises an NMOS transistor having a channel width sufficient to pull the output signal line OUT low when the input signal line IN is being switched
25 from a positive voltage to a low voltage.

The gate of the first pass transistor T3 is electrically connected to a preferred voltage clamping circuit **310**. The voltage clamping circuit **310** preferably occupies very limited area on an integrated circuit substrate and, as illustrated, may consist of first and second NMOS transistors T1 and T2 configured as MOS diodes. These MOS diodes are preferably connected in antiparallel between a second power supply line Vdd2 and the gate of the first pass transistor T3. The term "antiparallel" is used herein to describe that a cathode of one diode is connected to an anode of the other diode and vice versa. Thus, the cathode of the first diode (i.e., source of NMOS transistor T1) is electrically connected to the anode of the second diode (i.e., gate and drain of NMOS transistor T2) and the cathode of the second diode (i.e., source of NMOS transistor T2) is electrically connected to the anode of the first diode (i.e., gate and drain of NMOS transistor T1). The first and second NMOS transistors T1 and T2 may be the same size and are preferably considerably narrower than the first and second pass transistors T3 and T4. The first and second NMOS transistors T1 and T2 are kept small so that their capacitance is low relative to the gate-to-channel capacitance of the first pass transistor T3. The threshold voltages of the first and second NMOS transistors T1 and T2 may equal a threshold voltage of the first pass transistor T3.

Operation of the overvoltage protection circuits **300** and **300'** will now be described with reference to FIGS. 3A-3B and the timing diagram of FIG. 4. An input signal V_{in} having an initial logic 0 level (e.g., 0 Volts) may be provided on the input signal line IN. Because the gate of the second pass transistor T4 is maintained at a full logic 1 level (e.g., $V_{dd1}=2.5$ Volts), the gate-to-source voltage across the second pass transistor T4 exceeds its threshold voltage (e.g., $V_{TH-T4}=0.55$ Volts). Accordingly, the second pass transistor T4 is turned on when an input signal V_{in} having a logic 0 level is received and provides a conductive path to the output signal line OUT. Accordingly, the output signal line OUT follows the input

signal line IN to its low voltage (i.e., 0 Volts). Then, as the input signal Vin begins to rise from a logic 0 level to a logic 1 level during a pull-up interval, the output signal Vout tracks the rise in the input signal Vin. Once the output signal Vout increases to a level equal to $V_{dd1} - V_{TH-T4}$, the second pass transistor T4 turns off. With respect to FIG. 4, this turn-off point may occur when the input signal Vin has reached a voltage of 1.95 Volts ($1.95 = V_{dd1} - V_{TH-T4}$).

However, because the width of the first pass transistor T3 is relatively large, the gate-to-channel capacitance across the first pass transistor T3 may provide a high degree of capacitive coupling between the gate of the first pass transistor T3 and its collective input (IN), output (OUT) and channel. This high degree of capacitive coupling will cause the voltage on the gate of the first pass transistor T3 to be "self-bootstrapped" up in voltage as the input signal Vin and output signal Vout rise during a pull-up interval. The greater width of the first pass transistor T3 relative to the first and second NMOS transistors T1 and T2 (clamping transistors) enhance the self-bootstrapping. As illustrated best by FIG. 4, the voltage on the gate of the first pass transistor T3 will rise to a level in excess of V_{dd1} during the pull-up interval. This higher gate voltage (relative to the fixed gate voltage of the second pass transistor T4, if present) will cause the output signal Vout to rise to a level in excess of $V_{dd1} - V_{TH-T4}$. In particular, the output signal Vout will rise to a level of $V_{GATE-T3} - V_{TH-T3}$, where $V_{GATE-T3}$ is the gate voltage of the first pass transistor T3 and V_{TH-T3} is the threshold voltage of the first pass transistor T3.

According to a preferred aspect of these embodiments, the diode formed by the second NMOS transistor T2 within the voltage clamping circuit 310 operates to clamp the gate voltage of the first pass transistor T3 at a maximum level of $V_{dd2} + V_{TH-T2}$, which means the output signal Vout will rise as the input signal Vin rises, but the output will rise only to a maximum level of $(V_{dd2} + V_{TH-T2}) - V_{TH-T3}$. As illustrated by the tables below

and FIG. 4, this maximum clamping voltage is achieved in response to a positive input voltage transition somewhat in excess of $V_{TN1}+V_{TN2}$, the sum of the threshold voltages being the approximate range over which the clamped voltage on the gate of the first pass transistor varies during positive and negative transistions of the input signal. Accordingly, if the second NMOS transistor T2 and the first pass transistor T3 have about the same threshold voltage so that $V_{TH-T2} = V_{TH-T3}$, then the output signal line OUT can be driven to a maximum logic 1 level of Vdd2 when the input signal Vin rises to or exceeds Vdd2.

TABLE 1 below shows the terminal voltages for transistors T1-T4 in FIG. 3B when $V_{in}>V_{dd2}$. As long as the input signal Vin does not exceed Vdd2 by an excessive amount (e.g., $V_{in}>2V_{dd}$), the gate-to-source, gate-to-drain and drain-to-source terminal voltages of all transistors T1, T2, T3 and T4 will remain within acceptable levels (i.e., all will be less than or equal to Vdd2). Furthermore, Vout will be limited to only Vdd2, which is a safe voltage for circuitry (e.g., logic gates, buffers, etc.) connected to the output signal line OUT.

	V_{GS}	V_{GD}	V_{DS}
T1	$-V_{TH-T2}$	0	$-V_{TH-T2}$
T2	V_{TH-T2}	0	V_{TH-T2}
T3	$(V_{dd2}+V_{TH-T2})-V_{IN}$	V_{TH-T3}	$V_{dd2}+V_{TH-T2}-V_{TH-T3}-V_{IN}$
T4	$V_{dd1}-V_{IN}$	$V_{dd1}-(V_{dd2}+V_{TH-T2}-V_{TH-T3})$	$(V_{dd2}+V_{TH-T2}-V_{TH-T3})-V_{IN}$

TABLE 1

Moreover, if the threshold voltages of all NMOS transistors T1-T4 are equal and set to V_{TH} and $V_{dd1}=V_{dd2}=V_{dd}$, then the relationships of TABLE 1 can be simplified to those shown by TABLE 2. None of the voltages in Table 2 has a magnitude greater than Vdd.

	V_{GS}	V_{GD}	V_{DS}
T1	$-V_{TH}$	0	$-V_{TH}$
T2	V_{TH}	0	V_{TH}
T3	$V_{dd}+V_{TH}-V_{IN}$	V_{TH}	$V_{dd}-V_{IN}$
T4	$V_{dd}-V_{IN}$	0	$V_{dd}-V_{IN}$

TABLE 2

Accordingly, assuming each of the terminals of the transistors T1-T4 in FIG. 3B can support a maximum gate-to-source, drain-to-source and gate-to-drain voltage of Vdd without breakdown or deterioration, then the overvoltage protection circuits **300** and **300'** of FIGS. 3A-3B can be used in circuits where input voltages Vin having a maximum positive voltage up to 2Vdd are present.

Referring again to FIGS. 3A-3B and 4, the downward transition of the input signal Vin from a maximum positive voltage to a logic 0 level during a pull-down interval will cause the voltage at the gate of the first pass transistor T3 to be capacitively coupled toward a lower voltage level. As the gate voltage of the first pass transistor T3 falls, it is clamped at $V_{dd2}-V_{TH-T1}$, where V_{TH-T1} is the threshold voltage of the first NMOS transistor T1 within the voltage clamping circuit **310**. The terminal voltages associated with the transistors T1-T4 when the input signal Vin is held at a logic 0 level are illustrated by TABLE 3. None of these terminal voltages is in excess of Vdd.

	V_{GS}	V_{GD}	V_{DS}
T1	V_{TH-T1}	0	V_{TH-T1}
T2	$-V_{TH-T1}$	0	$-V_{TH-T1}$
T3	$V_{dd2}-V_{TH-T1}$	$(V_{dd2}-V_{TH-T1})$	0
T4	V_{dd1}	V_{dd1}	0

TABLE 3

As illustrated by FIG. 4, the output signal Vout will not immediately follow the negative transition on the input signal Vin as the input signal Vin falls below the level of the output signal Vout. This lagging behavior between the output signal Vout and the input signal Vin (see, e.g., point A on FIG. 4) is due to the fact that the first and second pass transistors T3 and T4 will not begin to conduct during the pull-down interval until $V_{GS-T3} > V_{TH-T3}$ or $V_{GS-T4} > V_{TH-T4}$. This condition is typically not met until the input signal Vin has fallen below the turn-on point equal to $V_{DD1} - V_{TH-T4}$. At this point, the second pass transistor T4 turns on (before T3 turns on) and provides an initial pull-down path between the input signal line IN and the output signal line OUT. If fast pull-down characteristics are not required, the second pass transistor T4 may be omitted from the overvoltage protection circuit.

In the drawings and specification, there have been disclosed typical preferred embodiments of the invention and, although specific terms are employed, they are used in a generic and descriptive sense only and not for purposes of limitation, the scope of the invention being set forth in the following claims.